

Historiography – Repositioning African History.

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Abstract: For a very long-time historiography has been to a larger extent considered to be the collection and preservation of historical information in writing or in books. This has seriously rendered the history of some societies crippled and unrecognized. It is quite often than not that writers of African history particularly consider it from the perspective of when Africa's interaction with other parts of the world opened up. Being that most of Africa's history was not written down in books, some historians deliberately or unknowingly describe Africa as a land without history before the interaction with other societies. Anyway, I doubt how a society that has been in existence for so many years with a series of rich sociocultural, political, religious, and economic practices be considered without history. That is one of the most utter misrepresentations, misleading, and malicious arguments a historian would ever make in the ethics and principles of historiography.

Keyword: Historiography, History, African history, Misrepresentation, Repositioning, Historical facts.

Introduction

This essay is aimed at discussing some historiographical approaches used to establish historical information. The essay explores some aspects of the following historiographical issues: the concept of history, facts in history, and how historical facts are processed.

For a very long-time historiography has been to a larger extent considered to be the collection and preservation of historical information in writing or in books. This has seriously rendered the history of some societies crippled and unrecognized. It is quite often than not that writers of African history particularly consider it from the perspective of when Africa's interaction with other parts of the world opened up. Being that most of Africa's history was not written down in books, some historians deliberately or unknowingly describe Africa as a land without history before the interaction with other societies. Anyway, I doubt how a society that has been in existence for so many years with a series of rich sociocultural, political, religious, and economic practices be considered without history. That is one of the most utter misrepresentations, misleading, and malicious arguments a historian would ever make in the ethics and principles of historiography. Thus, this paper seeks to argue and reposition the wrong attribution to African society and its people, by attempting to clearly state what historiography in a broader sense entails, and not merely referring to one aspect of preserving or keeping historical information credible. Oral narrations from respected personalities (elders), praise singing, and the roles of griots are quite important sources for African history. Therefore, knowing African history would call for thorough research by historians and historiographers to unearth historical facts about African society and its people.

The Concept of History in Historiography

History is a very delicate and complex field, but only a few people can understand this, because too many people, history is merely just a narration of the past, and as a result, they disregard the fact that not all that happened in the past are historical facts, instead, some are facts of the past. Therefore, historiography which simply deals with the study of the discipline and practice of history is a domain that has to be handled well by the historian in order to avoid sensitive lapses. However, the concept of history has been viewed and discussed in varying natures by different historians.

Manning, P. (2013), in his book, *The Journal of African History*, argued that African history as well as world history started to gain prominence in historical studies in recent times; and that in recent years it started expanding to the level of being written in books and being analyzed. He further argued that African history, that is written, was merely a set of interactions realized or encountered between Africa and the outside world. Little did Africans and non-Africans make findings on major occurrences and events in Africa before the 'global interaction', and even if Africans knew some of their historical past, they had never written it down. I really concord with Manning on the basis that both Africans and non-Africans alike should make a thorough research about Africa's past so as to establish historical facts about its pre-global interaction in order to help in the restoration of its position in world history recognition. Discrimination in the writing of African history has been for a long time used to reference the interaction between the continent of Africa and other parts of the world. For instance, religious history in Africa has been filled with the coming of Islam and Christianity, while political history is mainly related to colonialism and colonial rule. Thus, attaching the relevance of

Africans' history to its place, role, and position in the world.¹ I hold the firm view that African historiography should not be limited to encounters with other parts of the world. In fact, the encounters brought about a new phase in African history, with the introduction and imposition of new things in Africa. Historiographers should be bold to take up steps toward unearthing the historical facts about Africa and its people. Though the sources of such histories may not be found in books or library archives, because a large portion of it was never written down, instead African history is mostly passed from one generation to another using various traditional means like traditional rites, griots, praise singers, etc.

Besides, as figured out by OGUNDIRAN, A. (2013) in his *The End of Pre-history*, the improvement of historical methodologies over the recent past has gone a long way in mitigating and closing the gaps in historical elision of about 99% of experiences and historical practices of many societies in Africa, removing such histories from the historical inquiry of researchers. I hold a similar view as to that of OGUNDIRAN, A. (2013) because, in so many societies in Africa, where Africans have been living for hundreds of years, only a little or insufficient historical facts are known about such societies since modern means of keeping historical facts were not used in most societies. But in recent times, we have realized that due to the recording methodologies, so many oral narrations are filling the gaps of the missing historical information. For example, the work of griots and of course archaeological evidence have played a major role in the restoration of some missing parts of such historical past, particularly in Africa. Some major archaeological excavations in Africa have revealed discoveries of ancient remains which served as a good constituent in the writing of certain African history.²

In addition, it would sound very unfair if a particular place or society is to be attributed a lack of history on the mere fact that its history has not been written down, while there are many ways in which different societies keep their histories and experiences, including the roles of griots, praise singers, and oral narrations. Thus, I partially agree with OGUNDIRAN, A. (2013) that there is no such thing in history as 'pre-history', for merely justifying the period when the history and experiences of some societies were not stored in written records. In that regard, pre-history would sound unending for some of those societies whose majority of their socio-cultural practices and experiences remain undocumented. It would be awkward to refer to such societies as living in the pre-historic era, and it would be even more derogatory to refer to them as societies without history. Knowing full well that even what many refer to as 'pre-history' is even part of the history of a people. Essentially, history should be defined as a whole and not create unfitting separation between different eras or periods of history – it is continuous and wholesome. It is very difficult to give any account of the past that is not history, either before the invention of writing or after the invention. Therefore, I believe that if the concept of history is looked at from the point of view of "History of Man", it would comprise both the written aspect and the unwritten. Consequently, the history of Africa would be seriously left out if the unfolding of events is to be limited to the written past of Africa's interaction with other parts of the world, while a larger chunk of its history occurred way back before the foreign interaction.³

Moreover, it is obvious that if the concept of pre-history is to mean the period before historical information was written down, then 'pre-history' has longer effects in Africa and its allied post-colonial societies. However, this is not a justification for the popular view that such societies have no history, instead, it is a result of different historical methodologies and practices used in the collection and preservation of history. This is evident because many of those excluded societies existed in good shape with well-established social, political, and economic structures.⁴

Facts in history

Basically, facts in history have been discussed broadly by different historians; pointing and elaborating on the viability and of course sensibility of historical facts in relation to non-historical facts.

According to Carr, E.H. (1961) in his "The Historian and His Facts" in *What Is History?*, facts in history are not just merely dates of events, instead they weigh far more than that. He argues that knowing the dates on which certain events took place is important for the historian, but it is not the entire primary information the historian seeks or is interested in.⁵ It is therefore very eminent, and I believe that for historians to be able to give a very good account of events that happened on so and so date in the past, which is of course supposed to be historically proven and established with utmost accuracy. This claim of mine is substantiated by Carr, E.H. (1961), who equally argued that it is always important for historians to get the dates and places of events right, and not to confuse readers or listeners about the occurrence of such events. Getting dates and places of events wrong by historians will simply provoke doubts or mistrust for a certain historical account, hence the mistake of omitting or giving wrong dates and times should be

¹ MANNING, P. (2013). *AFRICAN AND WORLD HISTORIOGRAPHY*. *The Journal of African History*, 54, pp 319-330 doi:10.1017/S0021853713000753

² OGUNDIRAN, A. (2013), "The End of Prehistory? An Africanist Comment," *AHR Forum The American Historical Review* 2013 118;788-801

³ OGUNDIRAN, A. (2013)

⁴ AKINWUMI OGUNDIRAN (2013)

⁵ Carr, E. H. (1961), "The Historian and His Facts" in *What Is History?* Penguin Publishing Group.

avoided.⁶ Thus, so long the historian intends to produce an exactly accurate account of an event, remembering or knowing the date or period of occurrence and the place would help in substantiating the historical accuracy of that account. Despite it being a popular view held in the past, “that facts would speak for themselves”, I think Carr, E.H. (1961) is right when he argued that basic facts are just like raw materials for the historian which the historian can process into historical facts.⁷ The difference between historical facts from basic facts lies in the hands of the historian’s establishment or interpretation. While the latter is raw data, the former is processed. I believe that therefore, the facts of history can only speak through the work of the historians. Historians have a great role to play in making research, excavations, consultations, interviews, etc. to discover what is held in various societal histories. Thus, the processing of historical information is very vital in the establishment of historical facts. Besides, while it is believed that basic facts cannot stand alone; historical facts are proven and reliably important. The following African Nile Valley proverb (4500 BCE) is indeed very apt and accurate for the accounting of facts in history/historical facts, as it encourages the use of testing skills in order to prove the truth about any piece of information:

“There are two kinds of error: Blind credulity and piece meal criticism. Never believe a word without putting its truth to test; discernment does not grow in laziness; and this faculty of discernment is indispensable to the Seeker. Sound skepticism is the necessary condition for good discernment; but piecemeal criticism is an error.”⁸

The above is a good elaboration on the existing margin between raw facts and historical facts, and as such, it makes the work of the historian very delicate, because the historian is expected to process data well and come up with established facts for public consumption.

Processing of historical facts

The processing of historical data is a very crucial thing to be done meticulously by every historian. It calls for the use of different methodologies, sources, and analyzing skills to generate accurate historical information.

Basically, it may sound somewhat chuckling if I say every basic fact needs proper ‘cooking’ before it would be fit for historical consumption. And indeed, for proper deliberation to be conducted in the processing of historical facts, different elements should adequately be considered. Elements such as archaeology, society, tradition, language, culture, etc. Thus, the use of the above elements and some others would ultimately help in the reconstruction of pre-history for many societies. Ogundiran, A. (2013) highlighted the use of various factors/sources in the processing of historical facts as very fundamental in drawing pre-historic information. In the recognition of African history, there are obviously different sources that are credible and can provide useful information about linguistics, comparative ethnography, archaeology, art, oral traditions, and different forms of writing sources. This helps in fostering a clear understanding of how relevant the past experiences in Africa have contributed to the reshaping of present communities and societies. Hence, for the fact that the roots of history are deeply rooted in the past, then the establishment of that consistency between the present and the long past would obviously call for the proper implementation of good historical processes and sources like archaeology, oral versions, and so forth.⁹

Besides, it has also been argued by Carr, E. H. (1961) in “*The Historian and His Facts*” in his book *What Is History*, that in order to establish facts, the historian would have to count/rely on what is called the “auxiliary sciences of history.” These sciences are of great importance as they serve as great pillars which the historian uses to drive information on so many diverse areas. According to Carr, E. H. (1961), the use of archaeology and chronology, for example, are the main auxiliary sciences that enhance the obtainment of facts about the past. Contrary to what many people take for being the same in facts of the past and historical facts, there is a great difference between the two concepts or issues. It is therefore important to note that facts of the past refer to the whole lot of activities and events ever done by a particular society, on the other hand, historical facts are just some aspects of the facts of the past on which the historian is interested and has chosen to collect and analyze data for an accurate account. Thus, historians mostly use the raw facts of the past and subject them to historical processes for final interpretation.¹⁰ Consequently, due to the historian’s interpretation of historical facts, only a tiny portion of society or some class of people is spoken about in historical facts, while the larger chunk of facts of the past is left unspoken about. This is found predominantly rampant in the case of African society, as it happened in the Greek society in the 5th century B.C., where the accounts of history had been centered on some major issues in the Greek’s past, creating a lot of missing domains of past facts. I believe this has happened a lot to African history and other post-colonial countries, where historical facts and emphasis have been revolving around areas of foreign interventions and foreign dominance, leaving most of Africa’s own important past aside or not talked about.¹¹

⁶ Carr, E. H. (1961), “The Historian and His Facts” in *What Is History?* Penguin Publishing Group.

⁷ Carr, E. H. (1961)

⁸ Shabaka, L. H. (2019). Lecture presentation, University of the Gambia. Power point slide 29.

⁹ OGUNDIRAN, A. (2013)

¹⁰ Carr, E. H. (1961)

¹¹ Carr, E. H. (1961)

Moreover, it is always important for one not to only embrace any work of history without proper verification and fact-checking, instead one should also consider the writer of that history so as to know its level of authenticity. For example, instead of just quickly believing an account given by a historian on the number of slaves, for instance, who were taken to the New World, it would be good to know the writer and the sources used to obtain the estimated figure.

Conclusion

The term historiography is indeed a very vital aspect of history that deserves close attention. Although different people have varying views when it comes to certain things embedded in the field of historiography, it is also good to know that consensus on key areas pertaining to the field of historiography has also been founded. Practically, ranging from the concept of history, historical facts, and processing historical information as discussed in this paper, are essential elements that could be used for proper assessment of historical happening in order to give a proper account of what really occurred.

Finally, the collection of data and processing it accordingly is very important for every historian, in order to make a factual interpretation of such data for a candid historical account.

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